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ABSTRACT

The need to improve the quality of university education, the relationship between university and student, and suggestions for reform are examined. It is suggested that first-quarter students be provided the opportunity to attend a sequence of interdepartmental courses and a seminar that would address the nature and purpose of education. The need to develop the ability to think rather than just to know facts about issues is noted. The emphasis in current times on entertainment and a view of life satisfaction in terms of sensation and possession rather than in terms of comprehension and expression is noted. Additional cultural influences that affect today's students are considered. (SW)

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Unsolicited Remarks: On the Nature and Purpose of University Education

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This number of the *Teaching-Learning Issues* has been prepared by James Dickson McLean, assistant professor, Program in Human Services, College of Liberal Arts.

You can not teach a man anything;
you can only help him to find it
within himself.

Galileo

Learning Research Center
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

I address the remarks which follow to friends and colleagues who feel that it is possible to improve the quality of education at this University. I offer a critique of universities and of students—and of the relationship between university and student—and conclude with suggestions for reform.

There has occurred, in modern times, a tremendous increase in the number and diversity of things known, in the number of universities, and in the number of students attending universities.

As the number of things known has increased, we have been concerned that the process of university education reflect and include this increase, and have therefore been careful to add to our curricula courses devoted to the presentation and explication of new knowledge. Unfortunately, there has not occurred any change in the number of years given over, traditionally, to the pursuit of higher education, so that, as knowledge has increased, we have been obliged to make increasingly difficult decisions about what to emphasize in our curricula and what to neglect. Because the presentation of knowledge can be accomplished in a relatively straightforward and efficient manner—and because there is so much new knowledge—we have emphasized knowledge, with the result that education is now understood as the process of acquiring knowledge rather than as the process of acquiring capacities for organizing, understanding, evaluating, utilizing, or simply appreciating, knowledge. We have neglected the task of facilitating the development of wisdom in favor of the more straightforward task of facilitating the acquisition of knowledge, and in so doing, we have lost sight of the purpose of education.

As the diversity of things known has increased, it has become more and more important that we make clear, for students, the relationships between and among the various pieces of our knowledge, since knowledge out of context is meaningless. But we are ourselves diverse, each of us being responsible for the mastery and dissemination of some particular piece of knowledge, so that it is not clear who will pull the pieces together. In the absence of any cooperative effort for making clear the unity which underlies this diversity, we have been obliged, increasingly, to ask students to consider material, the meaning or significance or importance of which is not clear to them.

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As the rationale for learning has become less clear, the responsibility for making certain that learning occurs has been shifted from students to teachers: When students are asked to consider material which seems unimportant, it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to make certain that they consider it—by giving examinations; also, because the material seems all and equally unimportant, it becomes the responsibility of the teacher to indicate which aspects are most important. By failing to make clear to students the significance of the material considered, we have allowed the passing of examinations to become the rationale for learning; and by making clear for students which aspects of it are most important, we have relieved them of the need to think.

As the number of students attending universities has increased, and because funding for education has not kept pace with increasing costs, we have felt obliged to develop increasingly efficient procedures for discharging our responsibilities as teachers. We have managed to increase the efficiency of instruction by increasing the number of students in each class; as a result, the quality and quantity of conversation in the classroom has declined, and education—in becoming less interpersonal—has become less personally significant. Having increased the number of students for whom each teacher is responsible, we have been obliged to increase, also, the efficiency of evaluation. Accordingly, we have abandoned as excessively time-consuming those forms of evaluation which require that we communicate to students how well or how poorly they have succeeded in understanding and expressing ideas, in favor of those which require only that we indicate whether they have or have not succeeded in remembering each of a number of facts, thus depriving our students of information concerning their academic strengths and weaknesses. In requiring only that students memorize facts, we imply that education is a process of memorizing facts. In general we have increased efficiency at the cost of effectiveness.

As the number of universities and the mobility of students have increased, we have been forced to develop standards for insuring the comparability of education at different institutions and for facilitating the transfer of students from one institution to another. In pursuit of these two goals, we have moved, gradually, from an understanding of education as four years of intensive study to an understanding of education as twelve academic quarters of study or one hundred eighty quarter hours of credit or ninety thousand minutes in the presence of teachers. By making more precise and more explicit the relationship between education and academic credit, and by more sharply delimiting the circumstances under which credit may be obtained, we have suggested that education can occur only in classrooms and only with the assistance of teachers, that activities and experiences outside the classroom have no educational value, and that education has nothing to do with life.

There is no reason to expect that universities shaped by unplanned and incoherent social and cultural change would be designed for teaching; and they are not.

The increase in knowledge has made possible a dramatic advance in technology, including the technology of entertainment.

There has arisen in our society a large industry devoted to increasing and fulfilling our need for entertainment, i.e., for objects and experiences which give us pleasure, but which require of us nothing more than the price of ownership or admission. Whatever the particulars, the emphasis is upon pleasure and upon experiences which provide it.

It is clear, however, that satisfaction, as contrasted with pleasure, is the result of expression, and not of experience; that deep, abiding, personal satisfaction—life satisfaction—is the result of things that we do, and not of things that happen to us. It is clear, also, that greater satisfaction results from doing things that are difficult and challenging than from doing those which come easily and naturally.

As children, we tend to do what comes naturally, and left to ourselves, we are not likely to learn how to do things that are hard to do. Parents who take seriously the responsibility associated with the privilege of having children will help their children discover the satisfactions of expression by encouraging or obliging them to work assiduously at the task of learning; children who have been introduced to learning at home will be ready for more learning in school.

But there are parents who neglect their children, or rather who entertain them; and children neglected at home, or merely entertained, are not likely to work hard in school at the task of learning. They will emerge from twelve years of compulsory schooling with a very limited capacity for self-expression and with a very limited understanding of the relationship between education and life satisfaction.

Young adults with limited powers of expression will be dedicated consumers of experience. Even so, there will be certain forms of experience which they will be at pains to avoid. Certain foreign films, perhaps, will make them uncomfortable, and these they will dismiss as weird or boring and will avoid. Conversations about issues which are socially or politically controversial will perhaps bother them, also, and will be dismissed as depressing or a waste of time and will be avoided—as will certain kinds of food, works of art, people, ideas, thoughts, and feelings. In general, they will prefer forms of experience which are easily comprehended—for comprehension is, after all, a form of expression, and not one which they have been encouraged or obliged to develop. They will seek out objects and experiences which give them pleasure but which require nothing more than the price of ownership or admission. With only a limited understanding of the relationship between education and life satisfaction, they will attend universities in order to obtain certificates which will assure them of jobs which will provide incomes which will enable them to purchase more and better entertainment.

There is no reason to expect that individuals entertained by parents at home and confined with teachers at school would be well prepared for higher learning; and they are not.

When individuals not interested in learning become students at a university not designed for teaching, there will occur a kind of marriage of convenience in which the students will allow themselves to be processed in an impersonal and businesslike manner, provided only that they are not asked to do anything unreasonably demanding or time-consuming; and in which the university will award certificates, provided only that the students pay tuition and are well behaved. The subject of education is avoided by both parties.

The students will be delighted at the prospect of spending four years in an environment so obviously contrived with them in mind. There are movies on campus and interesting shops nearby, and restaurants and taverns, and pools, and parties, and football, and children their own age to play with. But universities have not yet achieved a state of total efficiency; and difficulties will arise for these students when they discover that they are expected to spend large amounts of time studying, to confront and to reflect upon issues and ideas which they would prefer to avoid, and to express, in writing, the results of their study and reflection. They will have difficulty meeting the standards for academic continuation. They will begin to complain, with respect to particular courses and assignments, that they are being asked to do too much, that the material is not relevant, and that the manner in which their work is being evaluated is not objective.

Complaints from students to the effect that they are being asked to do too much will be directed at teachers who require them to work hard at the task of learning, and will be expressed with great sincerity—perhaps even with indignation—since those complaining will honestly feel that education should not require so much work, should not be so hard. We will be unable to defend as reasonable the amount of work required for a particular course—however little or much that may be—since the manner in which we decide how much work to require is usually less rational than intuitive and is certainly more tacit than explicit. Also, by associating with each course a precise quantity of credit, we have suggested that each course should require a precise amount of work; and by awarding precisely the same quantity of credit for each of a variety of different courses, we have suggested that courses which are quite different should require precisely the same amount of work. Thus we have provided students who are having difficulty meeting the standards for academic continuation with a means of shifting the responsibility from themselves to their teachers: Instead of admitting to themselves that the work required for a particular course is too difficult for them to do easily or quickly, they can complain that there is too much of it, and can support their complaint by calling attention to other courses which carry the same quantity of credit but which require less work. They will seldom complain, on the other hand, in courses in which they are not obliged to work very hard at all that they are being asked to do too little.

Students with limited interests and limited powers of comprehension will find that much of the content of liberal education is unrelated to their interests and unrelated, also, to the task of securing employment. They

will, therefore, complain that particular courses and assignments are not relevant; concealing from themselves their unwillingness to consider material which is difficult or potentially disconcerting; preventing themselves from discovering that they are not good at noticing or seeking out relationships between ideas which are new to them and ideas which are both familiar and personally significant; and transferring, from themselves to their teachers, responsibility for establishing the meaning and significance of new ideas. We have represented ourselves, increasingly, as knowledgeable rather than wise, so that students no longer recognize our authority in matters of meaning and significance; and we cannot know each of our many students well enough to devise, for each of them, an individual introduction to the ideas which we ourselves find so personally and professionally exciting. We do not have the time.

Students who are well-schooled in the business of memorizing facts, but who are otherwise academically impoverished, will feel that examinations which assess capacities more generally useful than the capacity for memorization are somehow unfair, and will complain that performance on examinations of this sort cannot be evaluated objectively. They will complain, for example, that performance on essay examinations cannot be evaluated objectively because students who write well will have an unfair advantage, suggesting, in effect, that evaluation is most objective when it is least affected by differences in ability. We have, of course, brought this problem upon ourselves by giving out facts in lectures and asking that they be returned on examinations—any departure from this familiar pattern elicits complaints from students ill-prepared for other approaches.

If complaints of the sort mentioned above are expressed with sufficient urgency and frequency, we will be tempted for several reasons to modify the courses and assignments which elicit them: We are human beings and we want other human beings, students by all means included, to like us; we are teachers, and we need the approval of our students in order to retain our positions; and we are busy, and can make things easier for ourselves by making things easier for our students. We also hesitate to ask our students to do things which they feel to be unreasonable, and we are often unable to provide an acceptable rationale for the courses and assignments about which they complain.

To yield to temptation, however—to modify courses and assignments in response to complaints—would be to render the process of university education finally and completely efficient, and thus, trivial. We might well gain students by making education trivial but we would lose teachers—those with the highest personal and professional standards—and no one would be the wiser.

We must resist temptation, then, but resisting temptation will not be sufficient. Even if it were possible somehow magically to transform the attitudes of our students so that they were all eager for learning, they would still be ill-prepared for learning. The task with which we are confronted is that of facilitating the education of students who are neither interested in learning nor prepared for it, while employed by a university

which is not organized for teaching, in a state which does not support higher education. Bearing these various constraints in mind, I offer a number of suggestions for reform, some of which are more realistic than others.

We should require of all first-quarter students participation in and satisfactory completion of a seminar, introductory to the University and to the idea of university education. In this seminar:

We should express to students our understanding of the nature and purpose of education, make clear the standards and procedures for awarding academic credit, assist the students in becoming familiar with the various resources and facilities of the University, and finally, require them to think about and to then express in writing their own individual educational goals and expectations, however broad and general.

Also we should impress upon students the idea that life satisfaction is greater for individuals who do something—virtually anything—than for individuals who do little or nothing, and the idea that life becomes both less frightening and more interesting as our capacity for comprehending it increases.

Next, we should confront these students with the fact that they have grown up in a society which is increasingly devoted to entertainment and which therefore understands life satisfaction in terms of sensation and possession rather than in terms of comprehension and expression; and that as a result, they may well be unable or disinclined to meet the standards for academic continuation and may also be ill-equipped for obtaining life satisfaction.

Finally, we should ask them to accomplish an inventory of their capacities and inclinations, relative to the standards for academic continuation, and then encourage them to acknowledge such inadequacies as exist and to accept responsibility for working to overcome them.

We should provide for and require of every first-year student a sequence of inter-departmental courses, the purpose of which would be that of providing a context within which new ideas could be located and in terms of which those new ideas could be understood. Given a sufficiently comprehensive view of things, all ideas are related; and given a comprehensive system of ideas, any new idea can be related to ideas which are already familiar.

We should understand education as the process whereby individuals acquire the capacity and the inclination for certain kinds of thinking, and should therefore abandon the attempt to communicate to our students every known fact about particular issues or topics. We should emphasize, instead, the development of capacities for thinking about—for actively making sense of—issues or topics of the sort in question.

We should understand education as resulting from the struggle to organize our experience and our expression and should present to our stu-

dents, accordingly, more questions than answers—and ask them to formulate questions of their own.

We should point out to our students the fact that the purpose of education is not, primarily, that of preparation for employment and entertainment but rather that of preparation for making thoughtful decisions about matters bearing upon personal and societal well-being; and that they are responsible, as citizens, for increasing their capacity for thinking about themselves and their society and their world.

We should reveal to our students the fact that hours of credit and minutes of instruction have little to do with the amount of work which they must do in order to receive credit for particular courses or with the quantity of education which they may obtain from them. Even if we could make certain that the quantity of education associated with different courses were the same—and we are as yet unable to express quantitatively the educational value of an idea—the amount of work which students would have to do in order to obtain credit for those courses would differ, because students differ. Some students can do quickly and easily work which others can do only slowly and with great effort. Moreover, some students will do more work than is required, and some teachers can elicit more work from their students than can others. In general, then, we should encourage our students to look upon time spent in the university community as an opportunity; and we should ask them to work as hard as they possibly can during their time here in order to extract from the University the greatest possible quantity of education.

We should announce to our students that we will evaluate their work for three reasons at least: to provide them with information concerning their academic strengths and weaknesses relative to their peers and relative to some reasonable standard of performance; to determine whether their work meets the minimum standard for academic continuation; and to oblige them to think about the issues and ideas which constitute the subject matter of education. In devising examinations, we should make increased use of essay questions which require students to decide what ideas are related to the issue being considered and how; to decide which ideas are most important and why; to think about the implications or consequences of different answers; to realize that there is no one correct answer and to decide upon a best answer; and to then articulate their answer and provide a rationale for it. Many students prefer questions which have right and wrong answers, but few questions of human interest or significance are so well defined—and students who have never struggled with difficult questions remain, in an important sense, uneducated.

We should assume that our students will not think about issues and ideas unless they are to be examined with respect to their understanding of the issues and ideas in question, and should, therefore, arrange for some form of examination—or for the possibility of an examination—for

every collection of issues and ideas which we ask our students to consider: We may give many examinations but grade only a few; may indicate that examinations will sometimes be given without notice; or we may devise truly comprehensive examinations. Also, we can take advantage of the fact that students tend to study only or primarily in order to do well on examinations: We can make certain that they will work to develop precisely those capacities, the development of which our courses are intended to foster, by making certain that the examinations we give involve and assess the capacities in question.

Finally, we should cooperate. Whenever there are large differences in the quantity and quality of work expected by different teachers, students will complain—about the teachers who expect more and better work. If we can agree upon an understanding of the nature and purpose of university education and then communicate that understanding to our students, we will be willing to insist upon good work, and they will be obliged to produce the best work of which they are capable. We can then all get on with the business—and the pleasure—of education.

Will they like us? Probably not. Later? Perhaps. But education which is successful is forgotten, in the sense that it becomes part of who we are as opposed to what we have learned or what we can remember. Ideas become part of our equipment for making sense of ourselves and the world, and capacities become—in a very real sense—who we are. And we forget that we learned them and where we learned them, when, and from whom, and credit is not given where credit is due.

But we should not set out to obtain the pleasurable experience of having our students say that they like us; we should seek, instead, the satisfaction which comes from knowing that we have served them well.